

Robert D. Wideman

AP 3468

SCI at Mercer, PA

To the Honorable Pa Board of Pardons:

I feel blessed and honored to have a hearing before this Board at the end of May.

Given the fact that I have applied for a pardon a number of times, I have filed various statements expressing my remorse and responsibility for my actions which have resulted in my being in prison since February 11, 1976. I am now 68 years old and just had a back operation which keeps me from making a handwritten or typed submission. Accordingly, I am dictating this to my attorney.

On October 17, 1975, along with Michael Dukes and Cecil Rice, I made the worst decision of my life which was to try to scam Mr. Morena and his two cousins out of money. At the time I was a heavy drug user and drinker, which are not an excuse. My accomplices and I said the day before that we had a truckload of stolen TVs and Mr. Morena said that he was a fence stolen goods. We agreed to meet up at the Morena Used Car Lot on October 17 at dusk. Upon arrival I went in to the car lot office and my accomplices drove to a phone booth that we have previously found the phone telephone number for. I walked in and was surprised to see Mr. Morena's cousins, the Slaby brothers. I asked him if he had the money and he said that he did. I then called my co-defendants and told them to arrive with the truck. With everyone there gathered at the back of the truck with the exception of Cecil Rice who was still inside the back of the truck, we went to open the truck which showed that there no TVs. The only thing in the back of the truck was Rice holding a gun, at which point Michael Dukes drew his gun. I had no gun. At that point I announced that it was a robbery and that there would be no problems if they gave us the money. Then Mr. Moreno pulled out money, threw it on the ground and the wind started blowing. I got on the ground trying to pick up the money. At that point Mr. Morena ran off and Dukes said "He's running." I hollered "Go get him" and Dukes ran after him. Rice told the others to get in the truck. At that moment I heard someone slip on the gravel, either Dukes or Morena. I immediately heard a gunshot and I ran around the passenger side of the truck. At that point I saw Morena running across the highway, holding his shoulder in a drooping position. I shouted "What happened?" Dukes said "I was chasing him. I slipped and fell and I shot. I don't know if I hit him or not. Let's get out of here." In my mind I knew he must have been hit because of the way that he was running, but given how he was running, I had hopes that he was medically alright. I was in sheer panic at that time and we were scrambling, trying to get the Slaby brothers into the truck to drive away and leave them elsewhere. I was in such panic that I didn't lock the doors. As a result, at the first traffic light they ran.

While I consider I have said in the above paragraph to be true and correct, in no way is it offered as an excuse for my behavior or involvement. It is only my recollection of that night 43 years ago. As a result of my involvement I was tried and convicted of felony murder, a doctrine which makes me liable regardless of the fact that I was not the triggerman. Again, it is not for me to criticize the doctrine or its outcome when it came to me.

I have had a number of commutation applications. All of them ask why I deserve mercy. I've always said then and I would like to tell this Honorable Board, that I believe, in the final analysis, only God can provide mercy. I come before this Board, believing that I am also a changed man. But that also is not for me to say. I believe that only my works for 43 years can demonstrate that. Whatever I've accomplished is set forth in those applications. Moreover, I am honored that there are those in the outside world who will vouch for the change in me. Mercy is something that I pray that God will deliver to those whom I've hurt with my senseless, selfish actions on that night of October 17, 1975, especially Mr. Moreno's mother and family.

On that terrible night, after we left the crime scene, Dukes and I went out that Friday night. As we rode through downtown Pittsburgh, I was still full of fear and worry and for the first time in my life I had a seizure, which I have never had before or since; shaking, crying, blubbering away, and I felt as if something in me left my body. It only lasted for about a half a minute. I didn't know then, but later learned after being arrested, that the seizure coincided with the exact moment that Mr. Morena had passed away. Once I learned of his death, I knew then what I suspected from the moment of the seizure, that my future was gone. I had felt empty from that seizure and now I know why. All the love and care of my family and friends I had thrown away in a senseless act, a selfish greedy act that I should have known better after all they had taught and given me.

What I have tried to do through these 43 years of incarceration is to try to help other people. It has been a long and hard journey to get that point. Early on I was still using drugs, smoking pot and drinking wine in prison. I was a young lost and depressed kid who felt he would never see the streets again. Also, I thought that I needed to fit in and show that I was tough, so I was rebellious. However, at that early time in prison, my mother would come and see me once a month. She constantly told me to stay out of trouble and go to college. So, despite my selfish and self-destructive inclinations, I had to listen to my mother, because I simply could not hurt or disappoint her any more. A deeply religious Christian woman, I would have done anything she asked. So, I signed up for courses at Pitt and Community College of Allegheny County in the late 1970s. I eventually graduated with an Associates Degree from Community College in technical engineering. Afterwards, I took more courses at Pitt, but because the program was eventually closed down at the prison, I was not able to get my degree. I went on to teach algebra and trigonometry at the prison for 17 years. That is where I learned the joy of helping others. I also graduated from Garfield Business Institute.

Fifteen years later, in the early 1990s, when I was completely clean from any substance abuse, going to NA meetings twice a week, an outside coordinator told me that the worse you felt, the best thing you could do is to help someone else. When I would complain, he would ask me "Have you helped anyone else today?" It became a routine with us. It may seem simple, but that asking over and over again, "Who have you helped?" reinforced that joy of helping others in me. I knew at that time that this is what I needed to do, to learn to stop being selfish and self-destructive. At that time, thanks to God's grace and my NA activities, it was recommended that I speak to young teenagers. This came from the Chief of the Pittsburgh Police. Speaking to those young men made for a light that entered my life. To hear them speak reinforced the idea that I need to help other people, no matter what my situation. This enabled me to fight off depression and selfishness by the simple fact of giving of myself to others.

Later, in the 1990s, as I became more involved in NA, a number of outside coordinators became good friends of mine as conducted various programs for addicts in the prison. I became a "sponsor" for numerous inmates who went in and out of NA. As I heard their stories and helped them through the 12-step program, it lifted them, but also may have lifted me more. So, I continued my trek to try to be a useful human being in my world.

In the late 1990s my attorneys suggested that I file for a new trial as a result of newly discovered evidence that the Morena family had filed a medical malpractice case and had secured a large settlement. As is more fully set forth in attorney Schwartz's Petition for Reconsideration filed with you, I was ordered to have a new trial with bond then being put in place. It was just before Thanksgiving, 1998 and the table was literally set for the holiday at my sister's house. Notwithstanding the Court order, I remained incarcerated for reasons set forth in the Petition. I was devastated by this news. I had rode back to the prison with those bond papers in my hand. My family was full of tears. Little did I know that that would be the last chance that I might have been with my mother before her death in 2004. Yet, despite all of the pain and anguish I felt, I did not lay down but managed to continue on the path I was on, giving of myself for others so that I could have a life in prison. So, I continued with NA and school programs.

By 2007 I was blessed that the Warden chose me to be a part of a program called "Inside/Out" that was starting new classes from Duquesne University at SCI. Pittsburgh. There I met Professor Norman Conti. His enthusiasm for the program was infectious. Once we started the program, I fell in love with it right away. I saw how groups of people, no matter how different, can come together and participate in classroom learning, getting past all their differences. We started with college students. Everyone was nervous, but within two weeks we all knew each other's names, the nervousness subsided and we were learning from each other.

Professor Conti helped us build a think tank designed based on principles of restorative justice. He wanted us to try something new by replacing college students with Pittsburgh police officers at the prison program. Our first courses with the police naturally were very tense. We filmed them to keep a record. Eight police officers started with eight inmates. The

four officers were so enthusiastic at the end of the course that they wanted to join the Inside/Out think tank. They eventually went to their superiors with the idea that cadets do classes with the think tank. This has been so successful that it has become replicated at SCI Fayette. Professor Conti has also helped me create another Inside/Out program at SCI Mercer and I am so proud to have been a part of this, now just having graduated our first class at SCI Mercer. This has been the joy of my existence for the last ten years. It has kept me believing what my old NA sponsor used to say: "Have you helped somebody today?" And I know that I have with the result that I can find peace within myself.

If I am blessed enough to have my sentence commuted by this Board and to be pardoned by the Governor, as a result of my work with Professor Conti and Inside/Out, the National Institute for Newman Studies, in conjunction with Duquesne University has promised to consider me for a position. Their letter has been forwarded to you for my file.

As far as living arrangements are concerned, the latest expression of the longstanding love and support of my sister Letitia and her husband, has been their expressed willingness to live with them in their East Liberty, Pittsburgh home.

MAY I plead with this body, hopefully for the last time, to see me as I now am and not as some crazy twenty-four-year-old kid who made the greatest mistake a man can make.

Respectfully

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Robert D. Wideman". The ink is dark and the signature is fluid, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Robert D. Wideman